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ABSTRACT

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 established a national framework to guide the development of statewide school-to-work (STW) opportunities systems in each state. Governors apply to the National School-to-Work Office for 5-year federal implementation grants. Early research on implementation of STW in rural areas suggests that policymakers should be wary of prescriptive formulas and formats, as they are often based on the deficit model approach and are likely to provoke local opposition. Each community is unique. Local partnerships in high-poverty urban and rural areas may also apply for federal implementation grants. These local partnerships create the opportunity to link STW to rural development strategies in particular rural areas. However, little information on such linkages exists. Strategies for linking STW and economic development include coordinating services with economic development organizations, encouraging the formation of groups of businesses with common training needs, targeting high-growth industries, developing skills standards to better match what students are taught and what the workplace demands, and broadening economic opportunity by working with others. A focus on building comprehensive community-wide systems that incorporate education, economic development, and employment and training expands possibilities for linking STW and rural development strategies. (TD)

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Linking School-To-Work Transition and Rural Development Strategies

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Linking School-To-Work Transition and Rural Development Strategies

On May 4, 1994, Congress passed Public Law 103-239 [H.R. 2884] entitled the School-To-Work Opportunities Act (STWO) of 1994. Though the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 established federal support for the *vocational education* of selected students, the STWO Act was the first federal legislation to declare that preparation for earning a living is one of the legitimate and important roles of schooling for *all* students, including the college-bound. The Act established a national framework within which each state can create a statewide school-to-work opportunities system where all students have opportunities to earn portable credentials, to prepare for first jobs in high-skill, high-wage careers, and to pursue further education.[1]

The Governor, on behalf of the state, submits a state application to the National School-To-Work Office for a five-year state implementation grant. An application describes the state's plan for building the school-to-work (STW) system, including how the state will serve students from rural communities with low population densities. The term *rural community with low population density* means a county, a block number area in a nonmetropolitan county, or a consortium of counties or of such block number areas, that has a population density of 20 or fewer individuals per square mile.

Local partnerships may also apply directly to the National of School-To-Work Office for a federal implementation grant. These competitive grants are made to local STW partnerships in high poverty urban and rural areas. The term *high poverty rural area* means a block number area in a nonmetropolitan county, a contiguous group of block number areas in a nonmetropolitan county, or an Indian reservation, with a poverty rate of 20 percent or more among individuals who have attained the age of 22, as determined by the Bureau of Census.

Lead by a local partnership, the opportunity exists to link STW to rural development strategies in a particular rural area. The policy requiring broad representation on the local STW partnership seems to provide a mechanism for addressing the first and most important among policy issues in rural education: "What relationship should exist between local communities and the larger society and how this relationship should find expression in the school?"[2] As all of public education struggles to reconnect schools with the public,[3] creating community-oriented policies to guide and sustain implementation of STW components in rural areas will be critical.

Components of STW

Building the school-to-work opportunities system at the state and local levels requires local partnerships to implement programs that address three key components: (1) work-based learning, (2) school-based learning, and (3) connecting activities. *School-based learning* focuses on career exploration and counseling, student selection of a career major, a program of study based on high academic and skill standards, a program of instruction that integrates academic and vocational learning, scheduled evaluations of students' academic strengths and weaknesses,

and procedures to facilitate student participation into additional training or postsecondary education. *Work-based learning* addresses a planned program of job training or experiences, paid work experience, workplace mentoring, and instruction in general workplace competencies and all aspects of an industry. *Connecting activities* include matching students with work-based learning opportunities of employers; providing a school site mentor to act as a liaison for the student; providing technical assistance and services to employers or others in designing school-based learning activities; training teachers, mentors and counselors; integrating academic and occupational education; linking program participants with community services; collecting and analyzing information regarding program outcomes; and linking youth development activities with employer and industry strategies for upgrading skills of their workers.

Early research on implementation of STW suggests policymakers should be wary of prescriptive formulas and formats, as efforts to enforce the use of prescribed program designs are likely to provoke considerable local opposition. Policy makers must never loose sight of the fact that there is no single, simple transition from school to work.[4] While such as approach appears congruent with successful rural education reform efforts, STW leaders must find common ground for linking with appropriate rural development strategies.

Rural Development Strategies

A *rural development strategy* is "a carefully crafted and orchestrated set of tactics that are intended, as a package, to move a rural community or region in the direction of a specific development goal. This package of tactics is likely to include some that are implemented simultaneously and some that are implemented sequentially."[5] Elements contributing to successful local development are unpredictable from one locale to another. Some of the reasons include: (1) the great differences between communities in resources and location attributes; (2) the degree to which regional, national, and international economic forces influence what happens locally and the limited span of control any locale has over those forces; (3) lack of understanding of the major elements that give rise to local economic success; (4) lack of much theoretical insight into the same issues; and (5) the rather consistent evidence that when successful development in rural communities does occur, it frequently depends on the special initiatives, local attitudes, or leadership and actions of some individual(s) who prove all experts wrong.[6]

Because of the great diversity in Rural America, reaching a common understanding appropriate for recommending the best model for linking STW and rural development seems unlikely and unwise. Considerable difference exists between macrolevel trends and microlevel choices. What is true in the aggregate may not be valid for individual communities. Understanding broad development trends enables policy analysts and local decision-makers to more realistically evaluate the odds of success for each development option. Rural communities need not always "go with the flow," but they should at least understand the nature of that flow. Each of the following five likely consequences for rural development research and public policy[7] also impact how STW policymakers must think about linkages that add value in the context of rural development trends and choices.

First, pressures of international competition will force steady productivity increases in agriculture, natural resources, and manufacturing, expanding output with fewer employment opportunities for rural residents. Any hope of maintaining, let alone expanding, the rural job base, will require local communities and national policy to turn increasingly toward other sectors of the economy (i.e., retiring elderly, tourism, government activities). This new emphasis is consistent with the shift of rural comparative advantage to a third phase, one that emphasizes amenities rather than natural resources or the costs of production. How will STW policymakers advocate workplace learning opportunities for students that add value to rural development without facing undue criticism from parents who see tourism-related jobs as low pay with limited career opportunities?

Second, every level of the federal government now recognizes the fiscal constraints and accountability for public tax dollars that make almost impossible the creation of large new rural programs. Continuing pressure on existing programs is inevitable, requiring innovation in the basic structure of public action. Government programs must increasingly employ cost-effective, non-bureaucratic mechanisms, and they must use public resources to catalyze action in the private sector and in rural communities. Contemporary government can steer the boat, but it can't row. Will policy decisions that focus on meeting the needs of *individual students* in a global economy enable the STW initiative to stay afloat in rural schools and communities where a decreasing and already small proportion of the population has school-age children?

Third, the importance of rural linkage to thriving metropolitan areas means that efforts must be intensified to find effective functional substitutes for the geographical advantage of adjacency. Rural policy must focus on advanced telecommunications that could give rural communities more complete, timely access to information, and it must lower existing barriers to fuller rural participation in the most vigorously growing parts of the economy. Can policymakers advance applications of technology that support youth (and parent) aspirations for a high-skill, high wage job in rural areas, or is out-migration of rural youth a necessary outcome of successful STW initiatives?

Fourth, the emerging importance of size for community survival suggests that institutional change is essential. Small rural communities must seek to break down political boundaries and form new cooperative political units for education, service delivery, and public entrepreneurship–units that more closely correspond to the real scope of the contemporary rural economic and social life. Recent trends suggest that only through such consolidation can many of the smaller communities hope to avoid continuing decline and eventual extinction. Will education policymakers reach across school district lines in collaborative ways, perhaps through capacity-building opportunities of regional education service agencies, to implement a STW initiative that can advance local community and regional rural development efforts?

Fifth, many analysts conclude that the real sources of the "wealth of nations" in the next century are the skills and cumulative leaning of the workforce–the new keys to competitiveness. The gap between rural and urban education/training levels is frequently regarded as a source of

rural disadvantage. One major comprehensive study rejects the thesis that low rural skills are a cause of rural economic misfortune and that increased rural education and training would serve as a cure. The reason is interregional leakage resulting from population mobility. "While raising individual education levels improves individual opportunities, and raising the nation's education level should make us more competitive internationally, there is little evidence that raising local education levels is in itself a key to rural employment growth."[8] What enhances national wealth will not necessarily benefit particular regions. Many reasons exist for local communities and state and federal governments to embark on a new partnership to upgrade education and training. But rural communities should be under no illusion that such initiatives by themselves will suffice to create local job opportunities and prevent the outflow of young people.[9] Will policy decisions by the local STW partnership be viewed as advocating "another education project" or an integral component of a comprehensive workforce development system that emphasizes entrepreneurship and other job creation strategies?

Adapting to Change

Appropriately planned STW initiatives must attempt to address common weaknesses in a shifting rural economy. Rural America is weakest in those areas of economic activity generally considered most vital to national competitiveness: product innovation, management innovation, information development, high value-added services and production, and technical knowledge.[10] Importing people and dollars, with less emphasis on exporting raw materials and manufacture goods, reflects the transitions underway in many rural economies. Some people and dollars come for short-term visits (e.g., tourists); others come to set up residency (e.g., migrating retirees, government facilities). Old sources of rural comparative advantage (i.e., cheap land and low-wage labor) are being replaced by a new incentive in Rural America–quality of life.

A key issue for rural areas is whether they can learn to do a better job of implementing innovation developed elsewhere, in a manner that creates new rural employment possibilities for workers displaced by technological change. A possible niche for rural areas may be in incremental innovation, in essence supporting the continuous improvement of existing products and services.[11] Successful rural development requires the ability to see advantages where others see only liabilities. Thus, community mobilization and visionary public entrepreneurship are also likely keys to successful rural development.[12] Continuous improvement of rural schools based solely on student achievement on "standards-based" tests may fall far short of the policies and strategies needed for rural schools to link school-to-work transition and economic development.

In pursuing linkages, every rural community must decide whether to emphasize education; job creation; or overall community development, based on the assessed needs of the area, and what the community will support. Every community is different. Rural groups beginning new initiatives or working on ongoing efforts at linkages should keep in mind the elements that appear most important for success: (1) a solid base of information about resources available; (2) keeping the community informed and involved in economic development plans in order to assure community support; (3) identification and involvement of both the formal and

informal leadership structures of the community; (4) collaboration at all levels and with all sectors of the community–and with state, regional, and national organizations and agencies; (5) development of supportive services that enhance the work environment and the community; and (6) thoughtful consideration of the community's values, population makeup, and political environment.[13]

Policymakers must also decide how to equitably allocate school-to-work funds, a task seldom easy in states with difficult rural and urban choices. For example, educational researchers in Arizona question whether public policy in the state ignores social equality because resources available through the STWO Act are not concentrated in rural communities, although their educational and economic development needs are proportionately greater. They proclaim:

> In the long term, the number and quality of work opportunities in rural areas will depend, at least in part, on the adaption of state and local policies that reinforce and nurture economic growth and development and that foster linkages with school reform. Reforming schools in rural areas without focusing equal attention on economic development will only exacerbate the 'brain drain' whereby the brightest students leave to seek education and employment in urban areas. On the other hand, establishing high performance workplaces in rural areas without a skilled labor force is imprudent. State policies are needed that proactively help rural areas out of the Catch-22 in which they are trapped, i.e., needing a skilled workforce to foster economic growth and needing businesses and industry in order to foster the education and training of a skilled workforce. To fail to create such policies is to accept the fact that rural areas will continue to be plagued by unemployment, poverty, and their social consequences.[14]

Possible Linkages

Little information exists in the literature that describes how the national school-to-work transition effort has linked with rural development strategies. This is not to say that such isolated examples do not exist. High poverty rural STW local partnership grants awarded by the National STW Office to federally designated "Enterprise Communities" show promise for linking the STW effort with local community and economic development needs (e.g., Scott County, TN). Apparently undocumented, however, are the "lessons learned" from these and other sites for linking the STW education reform initiative with strategies that specifically address the short- and long-term development needs of rural areas. For example, what should we know from each state's requirement to *serve rural students* that can inform education policymakers and others who see the public school system as a key component of the rural infrastructure for improving quality of life and global competitiveness? How has the school-to-work transition movement been linked with the National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP), particularly in the 36 states with a state rural development council? Some states

replaced the word "work" in the name of the initiative with "career" or other language because of concerns expressed by parents and others. How this played out in rural areas is unknown, yet such information is needed if policymakers are to better link education reform efforts with rural development strategies.

Documents from the National School-To-Work Learning and Information Center profile strategies for linking STW and economic development. Recommended strategies include coordinating services with economic development organizations, encouraging the development of groups of businesses with common training needs, targeting high-growth industries, developing a system of skills standards to better match what students are taught and what the workplace demands, and broadening economic opportunity by working with others, like those in areas designated as Empowerment Zones or Enterprise Communities (EZ/EC). A focus on building comprehensive community-wide systems that incorporate education, economic development, and employment and training expands possibilities for linking STW and rural development strategies.[15]

For linking school-to-work and workforce development, school-to-work partnerships can encourage the coordination of different funding sources and can help different stakeholders, such as government agencies, community-based organizations, social service providers, employers, and organized labor work together to achieve common goals. Strategies to link school-to-work with other education and training initiatives that form a comprehensive system for providing all youth with pathways to a successful career include: establishing human resource investment councils; building community-wide collaboration; using existing initiatives and resources to serve at-risk and out-of-school youth; developing occupational skill standards and certifications; and improving labor market information systems.[16]

Conclusion

Linking school-to-work and rural development is a journey just started. Most information available to policymakers, including possibilities for linking STW with economic and workforce development, do not address rural areas specifically. But we are beginning to share what we are learning about implementing STW in a rural context.

If the STW initiative is to uniquely address the realities of rural areas in ways that accomplish building the local community, while also preparing the individual student to live and work in a rural or urban place, perhaps it is time to leverage public and private support for a more focused initiative in and for Rural America.[17] Such an initiative to better connect rural schools and rural development strategies with key support partners appears warranted to capitalize on the linkages started by the school-to-work transition movement.

Many of the policy and research questions for linking the movement with rural development remain unanswered. Conventional wisdom suggests far too many policymakers act in ways that reinforce the "deficit model" approach to addressing needs of rural schools and their

communities. The victim (i.e., rural area, rural school, rural people) is blamed for the failure of well-meaning models or programs. Reality may be that sparks ignited by the school-to-work movement have come at a time when the "winds of change" in both public education and rural development are fanning the flames for more collaborative partnerships and applications of technology to sustain both rural schools and their communities well into the next millennium. Conducting the applied research that reveals how local, state, and national school-to-work policy decisions affect linking the school-to-work transition movement with rural development strategies may be a necessary and logical first step.

Notes

1. S. Halperin, *School-To-Work: A Larger Vision* (Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum, The Institute for Educational Leadership, Incorporated, 1994).

2. David R. Reynolds, "Rural Education: Decentering the Consolidation Debate," in Emery N. Castle, ed., *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas), p. 477.

3. David Mathews, *Is There a Public for Public Education?* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 1995).

4. Edward Pauly, Hilary Kopp, and Joshua Haimson, *Home-Grown Lessons: Innovative Programs Linking School and Work* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), pp. 246-47.

5. David W. Sears and J. Norman Reid, "Successfully Matching Development Strategies and Tactics with Rural Communities: Two Approaches," in David W. Sears and J. Norman Reid, eds., *Rural Development Strategies* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1995), pp. 282-96.

6. George R. McDowell, "Some Communities Are Successful, Others Are Not: Toward an Institutional Framework for Understanding the Reasons Why," in David W. Sears and J. Norman Reid, eds., *Rural Development Strategies* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1995), pp. 269-81.

7. William A. Galston and Karen J. Baehler, *Rural Development in the United States: Connecting Theory, Practice, and Possibilities* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1995), p. 20.

8. David A. McGranahan, "Introduction" to *Education and Rural Economic Development: Strategies for the 1990s* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Staff Report No. AGES 9153, 1991), p. 8.

9. Ibid.

10. *Rural Development in the United States: Connecting Theory, Practice, and Possibilities*, p. 81.

11. Ibid., pp. 51-52.

12. Ibid., pp. 62-66.

13. Susan J. White, *Exemplary Rural Education and Economic Development Initiatives* (Washington, DC: Institute for Work and Learning, September 1981), ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED206926, p. 37.

14. Arnold Danzig and Judith A. Vandegrift, "Tensions Between Policy and Workplace Opportunities in Arizona: Does Public Policy Ignore Social Equality?" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 4, 1994), p. 21, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED374354.

15. The National School-To-Work Learning and Information Center maintains a web site at http://www.stw.ed.gov which provides access to a vast collection of many resource documents. For example, a "Resource Bulletin" entitled "School-to-Work and Economic Development (January 1997) is available at http:www.stw.ed.gov/factsht/bul0197b.htm.

16. Ibid., National School-To-Work Learning and Information Center resource bulletin, "School-to-Work and Workforce Development (January 1997), http:www.stw.ed.gov/factsht/bul0197a.htm.

17. For example, The Rural Challenge (now called The Rural School and Communities Trust) is a five-year initiative began in 1996 with a $50 million grant by the Annenberg Foundation to support a movement to improve public schools in rural areas, guided by a philosophy that schools and communities serve each other. The Ford Foundation made a decade-long commitment in 1995 to support a Rural Community College Initiative. The foundation seeks to enhance the capacity of community colleges to expand access to postsecondary education and help foster regional economic development in specific rural areas of the U.S. where communities face out-migration and stagnation or declining economies.